

Lab director delivers major technology policy address

By Kimberly Hirai, University of Idaho, Idaho National Laboratory Nuclear Science and Technology communications summer intern

Photo: Grossenbacher speaking

Idaho National Laboratory Director John Grossenbacher shared his perspectives on the relationship between technology and public policy during this fall's McClure Lecture Series at the University of Idaho.

A mixed crowd of students, educators and Moscow, Idaho, residents assembled to hear Grossenbacher probe a wide range of issues, many of which surrounded the implementation of public policy as it relates to emerging energy technologies. He said when one says science, one often means technology.

Photo: Grossenbacher speaking

John Grossenbacher addresses the McClure Lecture audience in UI's Hartung Theater.

INL's lab director meets with University of Idaho and other Moscow, Idaho, community leaders attending the annual lecture.

"Technology is human action that's based on knowledge. We use the knowledge of science to develop technology," Grossenbacher said.

And with that, comes the responsibility for it. Grossenbacher said use of nuclear technology could provide energy or be used for destruction, for example.

"We determine the ends that we want, and technology is the means," he said. "The ends - transportation, the means - the automobile."

"Technology has to obey the laws of science, but we're responsible for applying human laws, public policies and individual choice to the development and use of technology," he said.

Technologists - those who design and develop the technology of today - need to be reminded of the long-term impacts and possible human misuse that can come with that technology, according to Grossenbacher. He cited a failure on the part of many organizations to take that responsibility seriously. But government and industry regulation were not the only ones Grossenbacher considered.

"Certainly, we the public bear a huge responsibility for that [public policy in general]. Can we have effective public policy without an educated, informed and engaged public? Are we technologically literate? Do we demand quick fixes, free lunch, easy solutions, oversimplification and don't want to bother with what the consequences are?"

Grossenbacher said there are no easy solutions to these problems. But focusing on education and energy issues is important. Educators in the audience also felt they played a role in shaping the newest generation of engineers, scientists, public policy makers and other replacements for today's aging work force.

"Through our university outreach mission, we need to educate the public and elected officials about science and technology as they affect public life," UI chemistry professor Thomas Bitterwolf noted. "One of my personal goals is to graduate intelligent voters and civic leaders. It's slow and small, but empires have been built on less," Bitterwolf added.

Bitterwolf said he wished to increase scientific awareness among students and better prepare teachers to teach scientific subjects.

When concluding his remarks, Grossenbacher emphasized attention to personal responsibility, both in the corporate world and in individual tasks.

"We have to accept cradle-to-grave responsibility for technologies that we develop and are involved in implementing, and that means - think in the long term," he said. "I also think it means spending some time pondering how many weird and wonderful ways our fellow human beings will use or misuse this technology. The problem with that is no company is going to pay you to do that. A truly ethical company, in my opinion, will do that."

In addition to more general scientific public policy topics, audience members were also asked to consider specific issues surrounding nuclear waste and completing the fuel cycle and viability of hydrogen technology with Grossenbacher, while learning about the history of INL.

"As an Idaho historian, I found the discussion of INL's historical background to be especially meaningful," said Kathy Aiken, dean of the University of Idaho College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences and organizer of the 2007 lecture. "Grossenbacher's comments were informed, thoughtful and provocative," she added.

The lecture series was established in 2000 in honor of University of Idaho graduate and longtime U.S. Sen. James A. McClure. The goal of the lectures is to help University of Idaho students and the people of Idaho better understand emerging technologies and scientific advancements, and to illustrate how public policy supports and safeguards research, development and technology transfer. Past McClure lecturers include Dale N. Bosworth, chief, U.S. Forest Service; The Honorable John A. Kitzhaber, former governor of Oregon; Sheldon Krinsky, professor of urban and

Photo: Grossenbacher speaking

Part of Grossenbacher's address focused on INL's history and technological contributions.

environmental policy planning, Tufts University; Walter Rosenbaum, professor of political science, University of Florida; and Susan F. Wood, former assistant Food and Drug Administration administrator for Women's Health, and director of the Office of Women's Health.

General Contact:

Lou Riepl, (208) 334-9574,

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